

2005—2006 SEASON

# WU?<sup>@</sup>therep

## I AM MY OWN WIFE

By **Doug Wright**

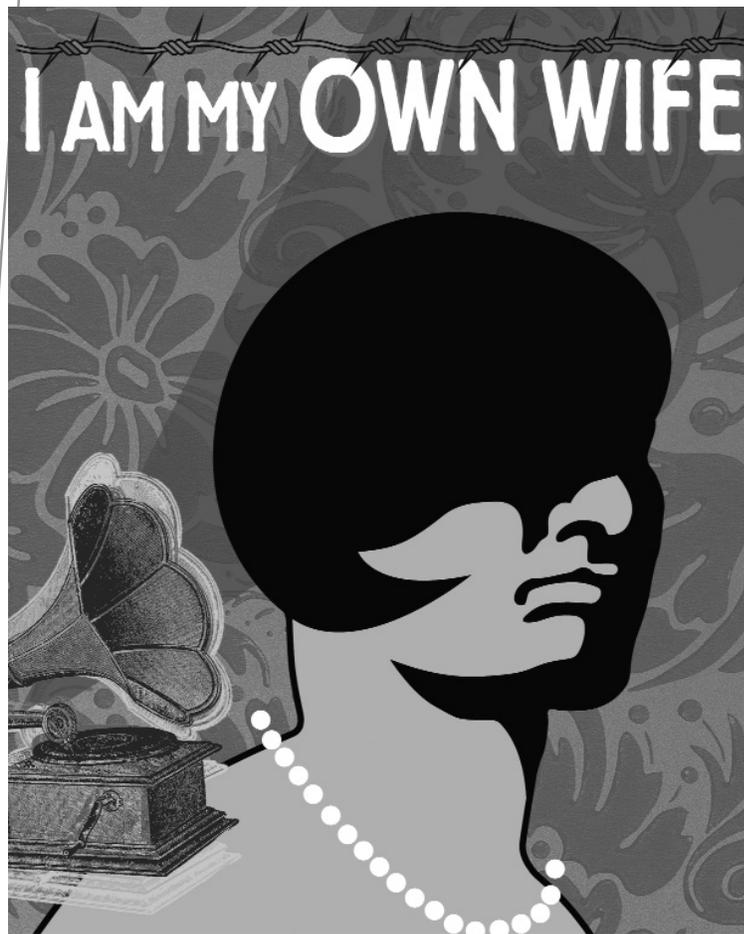
Directed by **John Going**

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# the 11

At The Rep, we know that life moves fast—okay, really fast.

But we also know that some things

are worth slowing down for. We believe that live theatre is one of those pit stops worth making and are excited that you are going to stop by for a show. To help you get the most bang for your buck, we have put together

**WU? @ THE REP**—an IM guide that will give you everything you need to know to get at the top of your theatergoing game—fast. You'll find character descriptions (**A/S/L**), a plot summary (**FYI**), background information on the playwright (**F2F**) and other NTK information. Most importantly, we'll have some ideas about what this all means **IRL**, anyway.

## CU@therep!

### The Teacher's Lounge



In an effort to make our educational materials more accessible to students and easier for educators to incorporate into the classroom, we have adopted a new, more student-oriented format. We hope that you will circulate this guide among your students in the weeks preceding your visit to The Rep, encouraging them to browse it before and after class and as time allows, using it as a launch point for both pre- and post-performance discussions. You may also want to visit our website, [www.repstl.org](http://www.repstl.org) for additional information regarding the production elements, such as scenery, costumes, and lighting. Any materials, either from this guide, or from our website may be reproduced for use in the classroom. As always, we appreciate your making live theatre a part of your classroom experience and welcome your feedback and questions.

**NEATO!**

Show Me Standards: CA 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7; FA 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; SS 2, 3, 6, 7 and Illinois Learning Standards: 1, 4, 5, 14, 16, 18, 25, 26, 27, SEL 3.

## MIHYAP: TOP TEN WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED AT THE REP

**10. TBA** Ushers will seat your school or class as a group, so even if you are dying to mingle with the group from the all girls school that just walked in the door, stick with your friends until you have been shown your section in the theatre.

**9. SITD** The house lights will dim immediately before the performance begins and then go dark. Fight off that oh-so-immature urge to whisper, giggle like a grade schooler, or yell at this time and during any other blackouts in the show.

**8. SED** Before the performance begins, turn off all cell phones, pagers, beepers and watch alarms. If you need to text, talk, or dial back during intermission, please make sure to click off before the show resumes.

**7. TMI** Not to sound like your mom, but "if you need to go now, you needed to go then." Leaving the theatre during the performance is disruptive, so take care of any personal needs before the show starts.

**6. RTM** When you arrive at the theatre, read the production program. It's like a deluxe version of liner notes and a free souvenir, all in one.

**5. P-ZA? NW!** Though your ability to eat ten slices at one sitting may impress your friends, no one wants to listen to you chew, slurp, or smack, so please leave all food, drink, and gum outside the theatre.

**4. TLK-2-U-L-8-R** We know that you will be dying to discuss what you see onstage with your friends, but please wait until intermission. Any talking—even whispering—is very distracting for both the actors onstage and the audience seated around you.

**3. LOL** Without you, we really wouldn't have a show. It's your job to laugh when a scene is funny or maybe even shed a tear or two in a tender moment. However, since you are not the audience at *The Jerry Springer Show* please refrain from inappropriate responses such as talking, whistling, making catcalls or singing along with the performers.

**2. SOP** While it's great that you want a celeb picture of your day at The Rep, the theatre is off-limits to the paparazzi. Flash photography interrupts the performance and along with videorecording is prohibited by Actors Equity rules. You can sneak a peek at production photos on our website, [www.repstl.org](http://www.repstl.org).

**1. LLTA** Let the actors know that you respect their work by remaining for the curtain call at the end of the performance. Show your appreciation through applause.

# A/S/L

WHILE *I Am My Own Wife* is a fictionalized retelling of the playwright's experiences with Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, all characters, including Charlotte and Doug Wright are based on actual people or compilations of several individuals.

CHARLOTTE VON MAHLSDORF holds the attention of the German public for many years, giving guided tours of her Gründerzeit Museum and of her life as a transvestite who survived both the Nazi and Communist regimes in East Berlin.

DOUG WRIGHT is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter who takes on the monumental task of sharing Charlotte's story with the world.

JOHN MARKS is a journalist covering the fall of the Berlin Wall when he discovers Charlotte and relays her story to his longtime friend, Doug Wright.

TANTE LUISE is Charlotte's aunt and the first person to witness and accept her transvestitism.

LOTHAR BERFELDE is Charlotte's given name, used in the play to indicate her boyhood.

MAX BERFELDE is Charlotte's abusive father who is a member of the Nazi party.

MINNA MAHLICH is the proprietor of the Mulackritze, a tavern for gays and lesbians which Charlotte preserves in its entirety in the basement of her home when Communist rule forces it to close.

ALFRED KIRSCHNER is an antiques dealer and friend of Charlotte's who is imprisoned for illegal trading after Charlotte provides incriminating information to the Stasi.



## READ MORE ABOUT IT

We encourage you to examine these topics in-depth by exploring the following books and websites.

Agee, Joel. *Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany*. U of Chicago Press, 2000.

Dennis, J.M. *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic 1945–1990*. Longman, 2000.

Gellately, Robert and Nathan Stoltzfus, eds. *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*. Princeton UP, 2001.

Grau, Gunter and Claudia Shoppmann, eds. *The Hidden Holocaust?: Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933–45*. Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1995.

Von Mahlsdorf, Charlotte. *I Am My Own Woman: The Outlaw Life of Charlotte Von Mahlsdorf, Berlin's Most Distinguished Transvestite*. Cleis Press, 1995.

Von Praunheim, Rosa. [videocassette] *I Am My Own Woman*. Cinevista, 1994.

[http://www.gruenderzeitmuseum.de&lp=de\\_en&tt=url](http://www.gruenderzeitmuseum.de&lp=de_en&tt=url)

[http://www.hirschfeld.in-berlin.de/index1024\\_en.php](http://www.hirschfeld.in-berlin.de/index1024_en.php)

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/GERnazi.htm>





MOST SUCCESSFUL writers, beyond having an innate technical talent for assembling words on a page, also have a particular gift for seeing potential in people and events that others might overlook and translating that potential into something meaningful and accessible for the larger public. Fifteen years ago, playwright Doug Wright noted that potential in Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, and spent months interviewing her and piecing together the remarkable story of her life. He was enthralled with this aging German transvestite who survived both the Nazi and Communist regimes in the former East Berlin, but for all the raw potential of her history, he could not manage the translation. Representing her fairly was a daunting task and one which he delayed for several years until he realized that he could portray her and her myriad complexities and contradictions if he included an intermediary in the play. And so, a decade after his first encounter with

Charlotte, Wright produced his translation of that experience—a play that allows the audience to see her through his eyes and experience his enchantment, disillusionment and awe as she slips in and out of her roles as a museum curator, a young boy in an abusive home, a Stasi informant and more. *I Am My Own Wife* encapsulates Wright's discovery process, including him as one of the almost 40 characters played by a single actor, and uncovering, one anecdote at a time, the life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf as well as the culture in which she lived. The narrative is always Charlotte's, though not always in her own voice, suggesting that history is not static but a fluid progression from one observer to the next. Regardless of the voice though, the record exists and must be played for the listener to hear and evaluate. That is the value of a close, but loose translation.

**The Gründerzeit** (literally: *the Founding Epoch*) denoted the first decades after the foundation in 1871 of the Prussia-led German Empire.

It was the Golden Age of Germany, when the disasters of the Thirty Years War and the Napoleonic Wars were remedied, German scientists were developing new technologies faster than anyone else, German industrialists were developing new methods and products that no other nation could compete with, and German merchants were once again taking over market after market around the world. This was the time when particularly the German middle class rapidly increased their standard of living, buying modern furniture and kitchen fittings and household machines, of a standard that wasn't to be outshined for generations.



Examples of  
Gründerzeit era  
furniture



# AN AMERICAN IN BERLIN

John Marks, a character in *I Am My Own Wife*, and the real-life foreign correspondent and friend of Doug Wright who first made the connection between Wright and Charlotte von Mahlsdorf is also a novelist, drawing from his experiences in Berlin to craft a spy thriller set against the fall of the Wall. In discussing his aptly titled 1999 novel, *The Wall*, he provides interesting insights into the world in which Charlotte gained notoriety allowing a fuller understanding of some of the forces that may have motivated her more questionable decisions:

*...the event [the fall of the Wall] blew me away. The sight of hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets and overthrowing an unjust dictatorship filled me with awe then...and continues to move me. It was like watching a birth. In Berlin, the revolution happened without bloodshed. Unlike the Russian Revolution, and most other political convulsions of the Twentieth Century, the Fall of the Wall did not bring death and destruction in its wake, but it did bring about the end of four decades of repression. I consider myself to be a child of 1989, politically, socially, culturally... The fall of the Wall marks the beginning of our era. In a very real sense, we cannot comprehend the world as it now exists, politically, economically or culturally, without grasping this rupture, which, virtually over night, put an end to what was once called the Cold War. Seldom does history offer such dramatic turning points. Until 1989, most people lived under the shadow of a global conflict between two nuclear superpowers that might break out at any moment and destroy the world. At the same time, oddly enough, people had certain assurances. The world made sense. Under the watchful eyes of the Soviet Union and the United States, conflicts around the globe could be contained. Because both sides had weapons of mass destruction, neither side could win; therefore, neither*

*side had an interest in using them. The demons of nationalism and religious fanaticism might exist, but were held in check by these larger forces, which gave a higher ideological meaning and shape to all strife. In retrospect, the Cold War made the world a very simple place to understand and a relatively easy one to manage. Its ending has left us nearly incoherent, struggling for definition, and the transition from one state to the other has never ceased to fascinate me. Third, and last, the collapse of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe in 1989 showed me history not as a collection of decisions made by powerful states, of diplomatic cables or economic statistics, not as a set of facts looking for a theoretical context, but as a living force—history, if you will, as an Act of God. I'm not saying that I interpret these events in a religious fashion or that I see anything divine in them at all. What I'm saying is that, as they occurred, they appeared to come out of the sky. At the time, I was a clerk in the Washington bureau of the New York Times, and I still remember the faces of veteran correspondents as they came to the copy desk to watch the television; in response to the images on the set, Berliners dancing on the Wall, mass demonstrations in Prague, fighting in the streets of Bucharest, their jaws would drop. History had taken us by surprise...*



read more on pg. 7



# face 2 face

INTERVIEWER KENNETH JONES, of Playbill On-line, spoke with playwright Doug Wright shortly after Wright was notified of winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *I Am My Own Wife*.

Excerpts of that conversation are reprinted below, with the full text available at <http://www.playbill.com/celebritybuzz/article/85381.html>.

**Playbill On-line:** I keep telling people it's some of the best storytelling on Broadway. I miss clean storytelling. But even saying that, there's nothing clean about this because Charlotte is a confusion to this onstage character that you created—the character named Doug Wright. She's a mystery still.

**DW:** *[Laughs.] She's a complete and vexing mystery, and I felt like in exploring her life, the best way to honor her was to present her with all of her contradictions intact. That's why I chose to tell the play through my own eyes, so that the audience would share my journey as I discovered, first—I thought—a hero, then, upon closer scrutiny realized, no—I'd actually stumbled upon a human being.*

**PBOL:** As complex as any of us.

**DW:** *Right. Absolutely.*

**PBOL:** There was a time when this was a pile of interview transcripts. You were stymied. You didn't know if it was a play.

**DW:** *Yes, I didn't. In fact, it was the tireless collaboration of Moisés Kaufman and Jefferson Mays that coaxed the play out of me, and I feel like I would be remiss if I didn't say that three dramatists have been awarded the Pulitzer this year, because the two of them were absolutely indispensable to the evolution of this play.*

**PBOL:** The script grew out of "theatre games," at Sundance Theatre Lab, wasn't it?

**DW:** *It was. Moisés said, "You've got this giant stack of raw material, you want it to become a play, you're completely blocked, so let's get rough and crazy and let's start to create a few theatre games based on the material." We did, and suddenly he got me to think about its theatrical possibilities in a radically new way. Had Jefferson and Moisés not interceded, I don't think there would be a play.*

**PBOL:** Moisés put on a dress in that Sundance workshop —

**DW:** *He did indeed. Jefferson carved miniature furniture out of old shirt cardboard. And I read what Moisés claimed to be a very tattered copy of the gay guidebook to Berlin. I suddenly realized that by showing snippets from her life, we could suggest the fabric of an entire 20th century and that was our goal. [In the final version of the solo show, Mays wears a black dress and pearls, Charlotte does indeed read snippets from the gay guidebook and miniature furniture is pulled from an oaken box to suggest the passion the character has for antiques.]*

**PBOL:** In the play, Charlotte appears on a wild German TV talk show.

**DW:** *Yes, that is my invention, but entirely true to the German TV shows on which she appeared. They're every bit as lurid and over the top as our Jerry Springer. I remember once she was on a show that was, "Celebrating Difference With Charlotte Von Mahlsdorf and a Dwarf!"*

**PBOL:** In its development, Robert Blacker, artistic director of Sundance Theatre Labs, helped.



**DW:** *Yeah, he was instrumental. When I was so blocked about the play and felt like I couldn't tell it in an honest or a true way, he said, "You can't tell all of European history. You've got no authority." He said, "Instead, just tell the story of your burgeoning relationship with her. You're not writing a history play, you're writing a love story." Suddenly, the play made enormous sense.*

**PBOL:** *I Am My Own Wife is unusually structured, small, surprising, some would say experimental — in a way, the narrator-playwright is on an investigation. It doesn't attempt to be what you would call "a well-made play," but it's rich with story.*

**DW:** *I am a passionate devotee of narrative. I think that storytelling has fallen out of fashion, and yet I think it's one of the most fundamental ways we communicate with one*

*another. I tell my students at NYU that if something funny happened to you at 9 a.m. in the morning, you test fly it over the water cooler, you've evolved it into a pretty funny joke at brunch, and by dinnertime you've created an epic. It's how we communicate our experience, by building narrative. I still think it's a critical and indispensable part of playwriting.*

**PBOL:** Did you know Doug Wright, the playwright, would be a character?

**DW:** *I didn't until Robert [Blacker] said, "Make it a love story." Then I knew I had to be [a character]. It also kept me honest: I thought, if I'm going to commit Charlotte's life to paper, I need to show equal courage and attempt to commit my own—and be fair to both of us, and be equitable in my presentation of us both.*

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## AN AMERICAN IN BERLIN continues

*I wrote a novel because I did not believe that a reporting of the events could do justice to their magnitude or to their drama. I wanted to try and imagine what it would be like to have invested everything emotionally, spiritually and psychologically in one view of the world and then see that world turned upside down. And I could not really do that to my satisfaction in a non-fiction work. Having said that, the novel is steeped in my experiences as a journalist in Central and Eastern Europe between 1990 and 1995. I have been to most of the places described in the book, interviewed dozens of people who experienced the transformation firsthand—spies, dissidents, student revolutionaries; I have retraced the events of the various revolutions and tried to stay true to the broader historical sweep. Also, as a work of fiction, The Wall has to do with my own personal and intellectual transformation during the last years of*

*the Cold War. When I went to Marburg as a student in the early 1980's, I had never been out of the American South. Suddenly, I was thrust into the great tragedies and schisms of Central and Eastern Europe. Marburg was then one of the "red" universities of West Germany. It had a high percentage of hard-line Leftists in its student body, and they were outspoken in their hatred for the United States and its policies...*

*I traveled to the Soviet Union and East Germany, where I experienced both the repressiveness and strangeness of Communist governments, but also met, for the first time, perfectly reasonable people who professed the Marxist creed. That year changed my life, changed the way that I looked at my country and my upbringing and lots of things that I had previously held dear. When the Wall fell, this period of my life itself had to come under examination.*





In reflecting on his writing process for *I Am My Own Wife*, playwright Doug Wright said of his subject, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf:

*In the end, she was as profoundly human as any of us. She did make compromises to lead this iconoclastic life; she protected her museum and she protected her own, very atypical identity through these notorious regimes. Those are huge accomplishments, and to think naively that she could have done that with minimal sacrifice denies the magnitude of the achievements themselves. No, she did those remarkable things at a deeply painful price...I didn't want to face this initially but then I realized that the original intention I had of writing this piece of hero-worship was more propagandistic than artful. I thought, 'If you really do admire her, if you really love her, then you should be able to withstand the full truth of her life and not just selective portions of it.'*

Though he was not creating a conventional biography, Wright shared many of the same challenges and conflicts faced by these

writers in recording a life. As historian, editor of *The Economist*, and noted biographer Ann Roe wrote recently in *The Tablet of London*:

*...biographers have care of souls. We are responsible sometimes briefly, sometimes for much longer for the reputation and afterlife of other people. We hold their memorial flame, and snuff it out or make it blaze as we please. What we say about these people becomes, for awhile at least, the truth of who they were. By writing biography, we recast in the world the shadow of a soul that still lives, that cannot defend itself. That soul depends on us.*

At the same time, those who choose to portray the lives of others have an obligation to the reader to examine the subject fully, look at all sources and select with care those that are most credible. The reader, or in this case, audience, also has a duty in interpreting what is presented. According to author Myra Zarnowski in her 2003 book, *History Makers: A Questioning Approach to Reading and Writing*



The Life and Times of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf

<p><b>1770</b> The Mulack-Ritze Cabaret in Berlin is founded.</p> <p><b>1877</b> Thomas Alva Edison invents the phonograph. Emile Berliner invents the gramophone.</p> <p><b>1911</b> Magnus Hirschfeld publishes <i>Die Transvestiten</i>.</p> <p><b>1920</b> Adolf Hitler organizes the National Socialist German Worker's Party (NAZI).</p> <p><b>March 18, 1928</b> Lothar Berfelde (later Charlotte von Mahlsdorf) is born.</p>	<p><b>January 1933</b> Adolf Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany. Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution denies civil liberties in time of national emergency. Federal police agencies, SA (Storm Troops) and SS (Special Security), are created.</p> <p><b>1933-45</b> Minorities, including Jews, Gypsies, gays and the physically and mentally disabled are deported to concentration camps.</p> <p><b>1934</b> Lothar begins collecting phonograph records and clocks.</p>	<p><b>1935</b> The Nazi Party passes the Nuremberg Laws, persecuting the German Jews.</p> <p>The lover of Lothar's Tante Luise is murdered under the Nazi euthanasia program.</p> <p><b>1937</b> Participation in Hitler Youth becomes mandatory.</p> <p><b>November 9, 1938</b> Nazis burn synagogues, businesses and homes of Jews in <i>Kristallnacht</i> (The Night of Broken Glass).</p> <p><b>1939</b> World War II begins.</p>
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*Biographies*, heedlessly accepting the written or spoken word is just as dangerous as giving an inaccurate account. She encourages readers to ask two primary questions when exploring an individual's life:

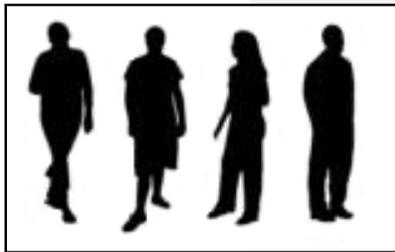
- What are the turning points?
- What if a different decision had been made?

This approach, much like Wright's technique of the one-person play, forces us to see the individual and the larger historical context for what they are—fluid works in progress—rather than static, predetermined stories to be learned by rote.

She also suggests follow-up questions of:

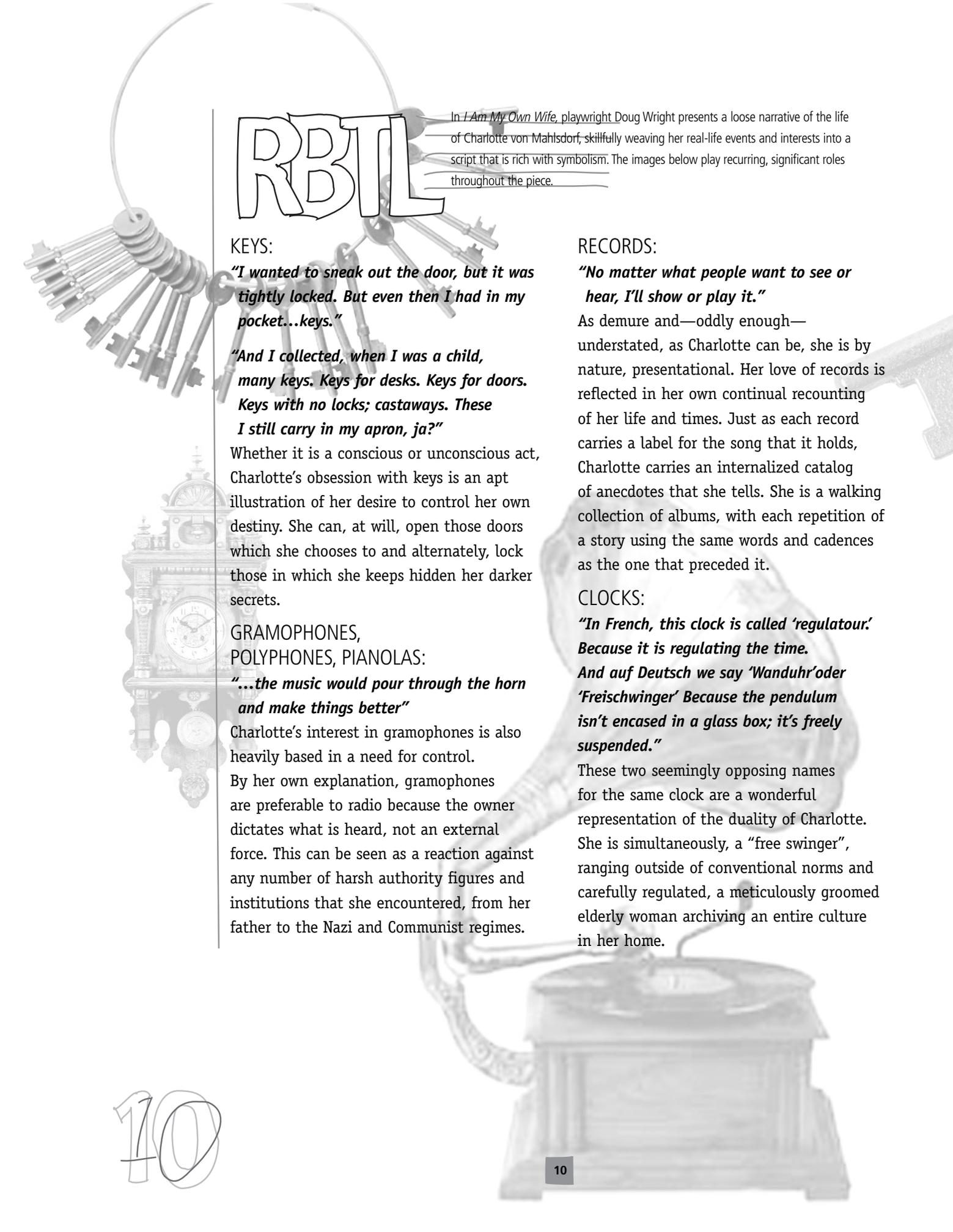
- What do I think?
- What else?

These questions prompt us to recognize the broader applications and long-term influences of seemingly isolated events and actions. It also makes us vital participants in our own history. While it is not the task of historians—amateur or professional—to make history, we do have a responsibility to attend to it and note its implications for our lives. Our responses to the choices of those who preceded us will shape not only how we exist today but also how we are perceived in the future.



► **APPLY** Myra Zarnowski's questions to Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's life. What were her major turning points? What if she had made different choices? Now consider your own history to this point. What have been the major turning points so far? How might your life be different if you had made different decisions at those points?

<p><b>1943</b> Lothar and family evacuate Berlin and move to Bischofsburg. He receives Gründerzeit furnishings from Tante Luise.</p>	<p><b>1952–63</b> In East Germany, Communists close gay and lesbian bars, including the Mulack-Ritze.</p>	<p><b>1963</b> Mulack-Ritze Cabaret is resurrected in the basement of the Gründerzeit Museum.</p>	<p><b>1990</b> East and West Germany unite. Charlotte receives the country's Federal Service Cross for her restoration efforts.</p>
<p><b>1944</b> Lothar's father, Max Berfelde, dies.</p>	<p><b>1959</b> Lothar takes possession of Hultschiner Damm 333 and begins restoration.</p>	<p><b>1971</b> Lothar permanently assumes the identity of "Charlotte von Mahlsdorf", taking the first name of his aunt's lover and adding the surname, "of Mahlsdorf".</p>	<p><b>1991</b> Charlotte moves to Sweden amidst allegations of being a Stasi informant.</p>
<p><b>April 26, 1945</b> Berlin is liberated by Allied Forces.</p>	<p><b>1960</b> Gründerzeit Museum (formerly Hultschiner Damm 333) opens.</p>	<p><b>1989</b> Under international pressure, the Berlin Wall is torn down.</p>	<p><b>April 30, 2002</b> Charlotte passes away in Berlin.</p>
<p><b>1945–49</b> Gay social life is restored in Berlin, following the war.</p>	<p><b>1961</b> The Berlin Wall, separating East and West Germany, is erected.</p>		<p><b>December 5, 2003</b> <i>I Am My Own Wife</i> opens on Broadway.</p>
<p><b>1949</b> The German Democratic Republic is founded.</p>			



# RBTL

In *I Am My Own Wife*, playwright Doug Wright presents a loose narrative of the life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, skillfully weaving her real-life events and interests into a script that is rich with symbolism. The images below play recurring, significant roles throughout the piece.

## KEYS:

*"I wanted to sneak out the door, but it was tightly locked. But even then I had in my pocket...keys."*

*"And I collected, when I was a child, many keys. Keys for desks. Keys for doors. Keys with no locks; castaways. These I still carry in my apron, ja?"*

Whether it is a conscious or unconscious act, Charlotte's obsession with keys is an apt illustration of her desire to control her own destiny. She can, at will, open those doors which she chooses to and alternately, lock those in which she keeps hidden her darker secrets.

## GRAMOPHONES, POLYPHONES, PIANOLAS:

*"...the music would pour through the horn and make things better"*

Charlotte's interest in gramophones is also heavily based in a need for control. By her own explanation, gramophones are preferable to radio because the owner dictates what is heard, not an external force. This can be seen as a reaction against any number of harsh authority figures and institutions that she encountered, from her father to the Nazi and Communist regimes.

## RECORDS:

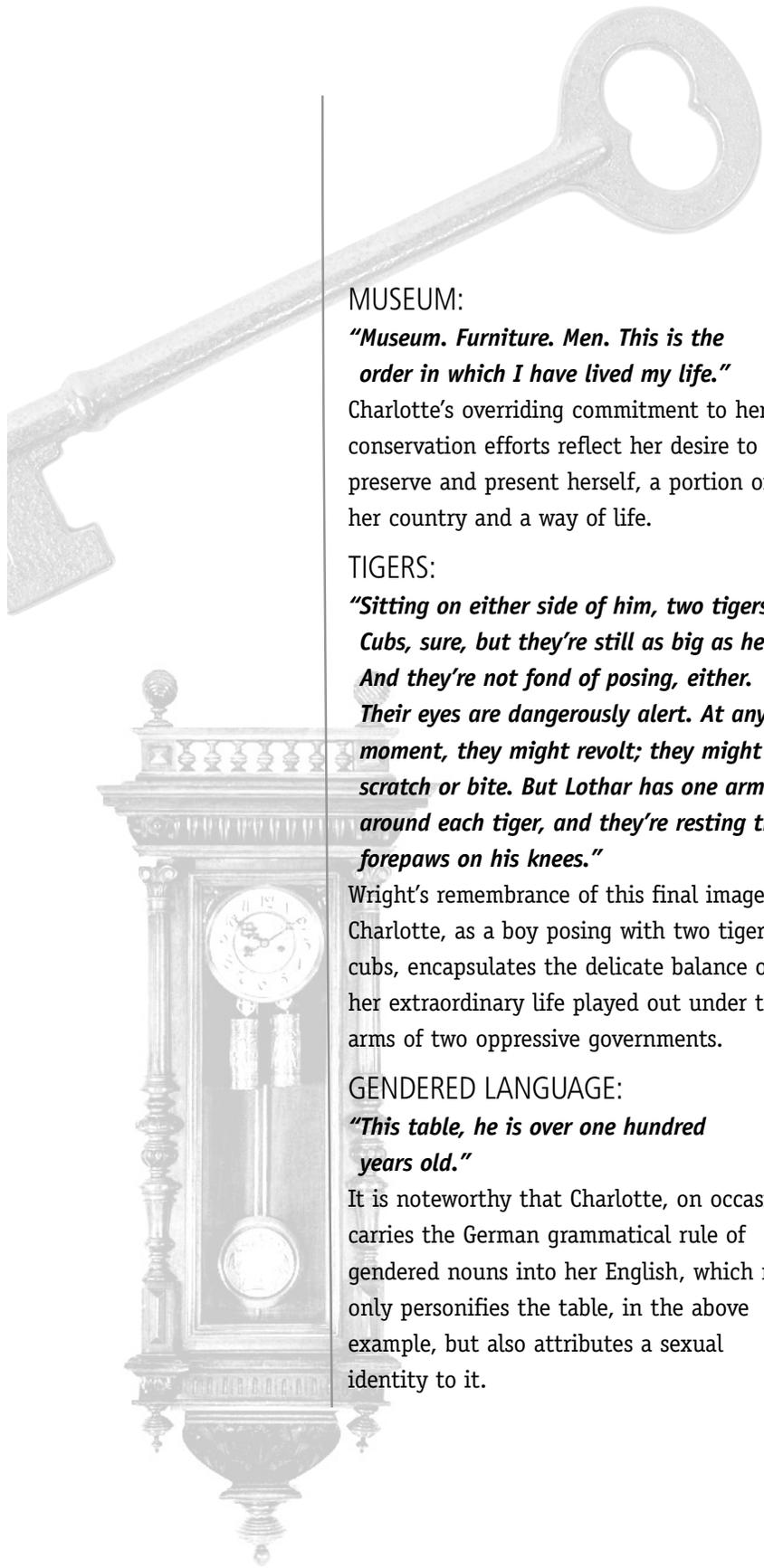
*"No matter what people want to see or hear, I'll show or play it."*

As demure and—oddly enough—understated, as Charlotte can be, she is by nature, presentational. Her love of records is reflected in her own continual recounting of her life and times. Just as each record carries a label for the song that it holds, Charlotte carries an internalized catalog of anecdotes that she tells. She is a walking collection of albums, with each repetition of a story using the same words and cadences as the one that preceded it.

## CLOCKS:

*"In French, this clock is called 'regulatour' Because it is regulating the time. And auf Deutsch we say 'Wanduhr' oder 'Freischwinger' Because the pendulum isn't encased in a glass box; it's freely suspended."*

These two seemingly opposing names for the same clock are a wonderful representation of the duality of Charlotte. She is simultaneously, a "free swinger", ranging outside of conventional norms and carefully regulated, a meticulously groomed elderly woman archiving an entire culture in her home.



### MUSEUM:

***"Museum. Furniture. Men. This is the order in which I have lived my life."***

Charlotte's overriding commitment to her conservation efforts reflect her desire to preserve and present herself, a portion of her country and a way of life.

### TIGERS:

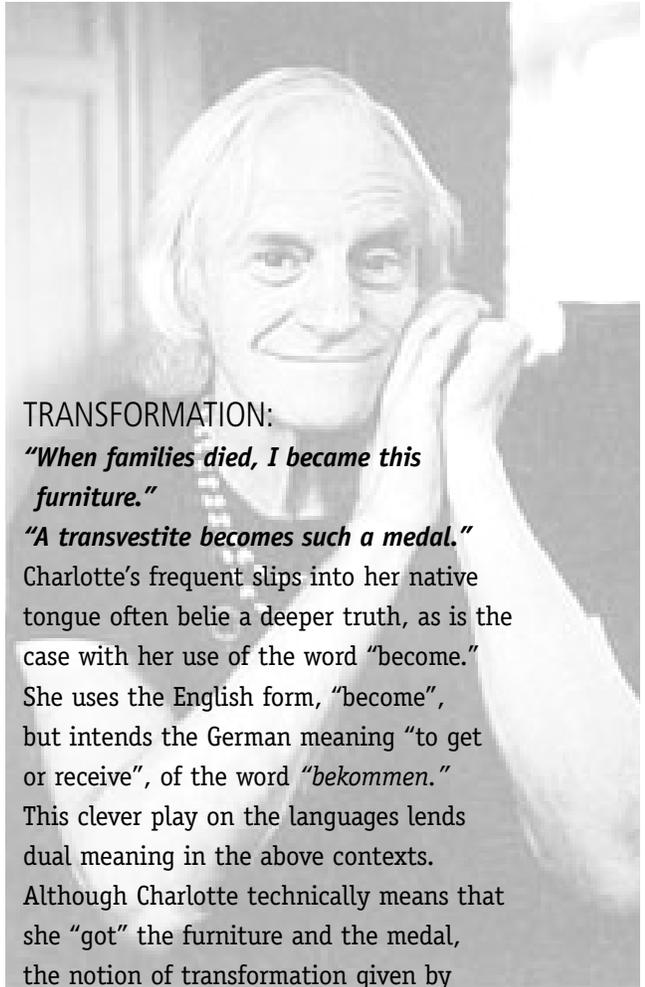
***"Sitting on either side of him, two tigers. Cubs, sure, but they're still as big as he is. And they're not fond of posing, either. Their eyes are dangerously alert. At any moment, they might revolt; they might scratch or bite. But Lothar has one arm around each tiger, and they're resting their forepaws on his knees."***

Wright's remembrance of this final image of Charlotte, as a boy posing with two tiger cubs, encapsulates the delicate balance of her extraordinary life played out under the arms of two oppressive governments.

### GENDERED LANGUAGE:

***"This table, he is over one hundred years old."***

It is noteworthy that Charlotte, on occasion, carries the German grammatical rule of gendered nouns into her English, which not only personifies the table, in the above example, but also attributes a sexual identity to it.



### TRANSFORMATION:

***"When families died, I became this furniture."***

***"A transvestite becomes such a medal."***

Charlotte's frequent slips into her native tongue often belie a deeper truth, as is the case with her use of the word "become." She uses the English form, "become", but intends the German meaning "to get or receive", of the word "bekommen." This clever play on the languages lends dual meaning in the above contexts. Although Charlotte technically means that she "got" the furniture and the medal, the notion of transformation given by the English word allows a telling second reading of her statements.

### ONE-ACTOR PERFORMANCE:

The use of a single actor to portray all of the roles in this play is not only an impressive feat from a performance standpoint but also an important physical manifestation of the fluidity of historical narrative. A single story flows out of many perspectives, always changing, each shaping the others.



# SWDYT?

***“And so I took old paper—brown grocery paper—and I cut it in the shape of labels. And I wrote with ink false titles: Aryan polkas and waltzes, yes? And I glued them onto the records, for safety. And when the war was over I took a sponge and with water I took the labels back off. And then the Hebrew titles with the dog Nipper were visible again.”***

- What significance do you think Charlotte’s telling of this story has? How does it parallel with her own life and that of others in World War II? Have you ever pretended to be something or someone that you were not in order to protect yourself?

***“We...have been systematically denied our own history. Our own past. Perhaps that’s why we’re so eager to embrace a martyr, even when she’s made of glass?”***

- In the play, this question is asked by a gay rights activist, but the words could easily be those of any number of minority groups throughout history. What other peoples have been or currently are being denied their history? How have they or are they responding? What does the activist mean when he says, “even when she’s made of glass”?

***“Be as smart as the snakes; it’s in the Bible.” “Never forget that you are living in the lion’s den. Sometimes, you must howl with the wolves.”***

- When pressed about her involvement with the Stasi, Charlotte offers these quotes from her Tante Luise. Do you think that Charlotte considers these admissions of guilt or justifications for her actions? Difficult circumstances do present ethical challenges, but do they merit compromises of personal trust? Would you value your own safety over that of a friend?

***“And she turned to me and she said, ‘Lottchen, it’s all very well to play dress-up. But now you’ve grown into a man. When will you marry?’ And I said to her, ‘Never, my dear Mutti...I am my own wife.’”***

- What does the play’s title, inspired by this story from Charlotte mean?

***“Her stories aren’t lies per se; they’re self-medication.”***

- What do you make of the psychiatrist’s interpretation of Charlotte’s behavior? Can fabrications or alterations of the truth be therapeutic?

***“But I need to believe in her stories as much as she does!...I need to believe that things like that are true. That they can happen in the world.”***

- Doug Wright probably is not alone in his desire to see Charlotte’s stories authenticated. What about accounts of triumph over adversity is so appealing to us? Why is it important for us to believe that people overcome incredible odds?

***“You must save everything. And you must show it—auf Englisch, we say—“as is.”***

- Why do you think Charlotte is so committed to preserving her collection and in turn her life “as is”? Do you think that the playwright has been successful in presenting Charlotte in this way?

